

The Southgate House, Leon Russell and Audio Anarchy

Steven Lansky

I got the job through a contact at the radio station where I spun discs for a lark. Honestly, I'm small fry. I worked one weekend air shift for six years building it from one to three hours and developing a progressively nagging following. I shouldn't complain. Listeners who called late Sunday nights were rarely drunk and often made pledges to the station. But this one fellow—a harp player for a local band had become pesky. He'd call when I adjusted the volume levels too much during a song and ask me what was wrong. Something was wrong all right, he wanted to come on the air Superbowl Sunday and read aloud about his former spouse's suicide. I believe in talking about tense issues, but as the day approached I got cold feet. Things were going sour then. I was separated from my wife and off my medication. I split town, took a winter tour of the South and Northeast driving through a blizzard. The weekly radio show was a casualty of the trip. A job offer came a year later. The PR rep from the station dropped me a note that a promoter needed some "light" security for a Leon Russell show at the Southgate House in Newport, Kentucky. I thought I might get a chance to meet a music legend on the down side of his career, one of those aging stars who took a gig no one thought he'd take, at a venue small enough that I'd actually see him.

Then the promoter called early the day of the show. I feared that she wanted me to help haul in the audio gear for the show. I'm a bit old for that sort of labor and never intended to risk hurting my back. But, security sounded easy. I figured to show up and shirk if called upon to do heavy lifting. It was a nice day and I had nothing planned, so I drove over the river with the sunroof open, the breeze blowing my hair. My mirror aviator sunglasses gave me that classic look. As I say, I'm not too damn ugly. I have a cropped full beard that's darker than my long hair. My friend, Karen, says I have gentle bovine eyes. At six-two, and a slightly out of shape two-fifty, I don't look easy to mess with. My strategy for security focused on setting a formidable vibe.

The lady promoter had told me on the phone that I wouldn't be paid, and I was just to stand by the stage and keep people from doing anything stupid. From her description, the gig sounded more and more like work, and stupid work at that. I kept my energy low key. I figure, when you have a rock show, lots of booze, probably some weed, speed, crack and crank, the thing to do is keep the granola guy humor on top. I wouldn't push anybody; nobody would push me. When I first met the promoter over a year earlier, she had tried to turn my wife away from a show. I had a guest pass for

two, or so I thought. I recalled that this lady's dyed, black pageboy looked strange framing her once pretty face. Tired rims on dark beady eyes, and a mouth that worked too hard more than suggested that she only had one free ticket for the two of us. In the smoky, cavernous nightclub there were few seats left. In the end, her husband had smoothed the conflict over, but I had boiled with anger. Now, the woman was warmer towards me, but the sour memory of her first Newport welcome lingered. "I'm glad you're big and intimidating," she had said on the phone this time. Hey, I have a fucking mind too, lady, I thought to myself.

Southgate House was an historic landmark in Newport, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Known because Lincoln had slept there and the inventor of the Tommy Gun was born there, it was a giant, gray brick Victorian mansion with a ballroom in back that had been converted into a concert hall that could handle four-hundred drunken hillbillies and only be seventy-five or so beyond the capacity that the Fire Marshall allowed.

When I got to the mansion, I let myself in and wandered around down the creaky steps into the dark, airy ballroom. The high glass block windows lit the room now. I found the promoter's husband and he asked me right off to help transport the star. He looked like an English professor, in pressed khakis, a solid brown button-down shirt, and a thin gray mustache. His handshake was firm, and his gray eyes twinkled when he talked about rock stars. "You'll bring him from his tour bus in the motel parking lot to the backstage entrance."

Then, the lady promoter turned up with her own instructions. "Don't let anyone on the stage," she said, as I visualized dancing babes trying to get close to Leon while I tugged at their jeans from behind, a hand on each cheek, my long hair flowing. "Just stand by the stage and look intimidating."

"Okay," I said, re-visualizing standing there, arms folded.

"Leon's manager told me he'd only accept money orders, so I bought them for him," she said. "Now, he says he needs cash. It's Saturday afternoon. The banks are closed." Her mouth twisted around a cigarette. Her husband wandered back over after she moved off. He told me what I'd really be doing most of the evening, which was closer to what I'd originally visualized—standing at the door checking hand stamps.

Now that my tasks were set, I stood around watching young men with the stereotypical green tattoos, on otherwise pale arms, hoist square, rectilinear, flat black speaker cabinets onto hand trucks, and wheel them down a wooden ramp propped on the back stairway. A tall bearded man with a ponytail, big colorful biceps and bad teeth, who was dressed in a black leather vest and black t-shirt sidled over and asked in a low voice, "Are you local?"

I nodded, "Yes."

He moved over close enough so I could smell the whiskey on his breath. "You know where I can get some crank?"

"No," I said, moving away as he asked, "What did you think I wanted?"

"I didn't know."

Then, I split before anyone asked me to carry any of the sound gear. I went home and returned later on after a shower and shampoo. I had to set an example for the hippies and hillbillies.

Nelson Pilsner called. He told me he found an old beer sign with his name on it. I thought that was funny. His name *was* Pilsner, for Chrissake. But, he insisted that name on the sign was spelled the same as his and was unusual and vintage, or some shit. So, he bought it. I told him he should use his newfangled camera to take

a close picture of the sign, run it into his processor and print it on light label stock. He listened. I told him to put the labels on the brown re-sealable bottles he'd been brewing with at home. My brother had been doing this kind of thing with white wine for some time—although my brother might just sweat the labels off someone else's wine bottles. But then, maybe, he actually knew a vintner. I'm not up to speed with my brother's scams. But, Pilsner could print out his own labels. He had come up with an instant home brew he called *Pilsner*, and it wasn't half bad. And he always had a case or two of the stuff sitting around, so he could give select bottles to celebs through his friends. I told him about the Leon Russell light security gig. He loved the idea of giving Leon and his band a case of his special *Pilsner* beer. Suddenly, I felt like some kind of Newport, Kentucky bootlegger!

The opening act played till about nine forty-five, while I dutifully checked hand stamps and watched an idiot feed quarters into an old, gray plastic and steel cigarette vending machine that had a huge OUT OF ORDER sign below the change slot. Then, he asked me for his money back. I passed him to the bartender who, believe it or not, refunded his money.

Finally, I got the high sign from the promoter's husband and exited the stage door into a warm fall night. I opened the star roof on my Toyota and headed for Leon's tour bus. The bus dominated the Travelodge parking lot. I parked my car on the warm pavement and knocked on the gleaming chrome door.

The woman who answered was a drop-dead knockout. Black hair cascaded across slim shoulders partially hiding a shapely chest. She had olive-toned skin with full, deep red lips. Her deep, warm brown eyes were shining almond shaped crescents.

I could see into the shadows. "It's time," she said to the star, reaching up to turn off the TV. Leon's white hair, sunglasses and beard hid his face except for a prominent, fleshy nose. He held a cane by its jeweled handle and he gingerly climbed down the steps out of the bus, traversed the several yards to the Toyota, limping slightly on the bad leg, and climbed into the car where he struggled with the automatic seat belt, causing his tall, white cowboy hat to tip onto his forehead. The girl and a guy slid into the back seat. Leon asked me to close the roof as he doffed his hat.

I caught a whiff of cologne or booze. Maybe both. "I'm honored to meet you, Sir," I said. "I've been listening to your music since I was a teenager. You must hear that a lot." He had a good handshake for a musician. (Ever noticed how careful guitarists and keyboard players are of their hands?)

"There used to be a lot of gambling here," he said.

I adjusted the rearview mirror. I just couldn't keep my eyes off the girl in back.

"Yes, so I've heard," I said, "Are you a gambler?"

"No," he said, killing the conversation for a moment, as I put the car into gear. We arrived in the alley and he spoke to the girl, cocking his head halfway.

"Shoogie, at least you're not chewing gum like last night in Cleveland."

"No," she said. I thought I saw her looking down into the shadows, as I glanced again in the mirror.

"Altoids?" I asked, as I picked up the tin from the dashboard shelf and reached back toward her.

"No thanks," she said. Then, I half-heartedly offered to the others.

An awkward silence fell between us as I cut the engine. Finally, Leon spoke, saying to me, "When you hear *Kansas City*, get the car ready." Then, it was time. I could hear the crowd howl from the alley when I opened the car door.

I re-entered the Southgate House through the dark, backstage entrance and resumed

checking hand stamps. By this time, Southgate's ballroom was filled with hazy smoke swirling in the colored stage lights, while wide-eyed shouting longhairs swayed to the pounding rock-n-roll filling the air. When Leon reached the microphone on stage, he said, "Thanks for inviting me to The Newport Jazz Festival." The crowd shouted with approval. Shoogle sat front and center on the stage with a huge beaded gourd wedged between her thighs. There was no mike on her instrument. She tapped at the gourd half-heartedly, frowning, slouching and looking miserable. The promoter's husband told me Shoogle was Leon's daughter and the drummer was his son. They were both dark-skinned compared to Russell. As he played and sang, his white hat shone in the hazy light. The gruff voice bellowed and rolled. When he launched into *Back to the Islands*, I remembered my teen years in California dancing with a wild blonde on the beach. It was our song. Leon had it then and he still did.

As I took my position at the door, a thin, flat-chested, blonde girl in a tight, red silky blouse with sleeves dangling past her hands, threw herself at me like an animal. She was obviously tipped pretty deep into her cups. "I'm forty-two," she shouted. "I'm forty-two and Leon's there in my dreams," she cried, her chewed nails and tight clammy hands digging into my big warm mitts. She pressed her body against me, pulling at my jeans. Then, she hugged me, forcing her face into mine, trying to kiss me.

"No," I said, pushing her away, "I'm not the one." She clawed at my hands, as I pulled hers from my waist. She obviously only wanted me for my body. When I realized that and saw it manifest beyond any doubt I felt angry, resentful—even hurt. Sure, I'm a handsome man, and I like being attractive to the opposite sex as much as any man, but I am a thinking man as well. I looked for a spark beyond the tearful red-rimmed eyes staring drunkenly at me and at that mouth twisted with sobs. It sadly occurred to me that she was just an older, sadder, version of my California blonde, as I watched her rub her nubby fingers together, pasty from pumping ethyl in the Newport night.

When I got her loose from my body, I moved a few paces away and she climbed onto her drunken boyfriend. They connected at the lips and staggered together for a while. I moved back to the entrance and watched the crowd reel and roll with the rhythm of rock-a-billy. For Leon, it seemed this must be a sad time too, his career on a downward slide from the seventies when he was on top performing at the Bangladesh concert with Bob Dylan, Billy Preston, George Harrison and Eric Clapton. In those days, Leon's *Jumpin' Jack Flash* was everyone's favorite.

A dark eyed, large featured woman with frizzy hair came over with a note on a cocktail napkin. Her flesh bulged out of her black leather pants and puffy white sweater. "Give this to Leon for me," she said. I told her I couldn't. She started to insist that I could, and told me she knew I was the promoter. I didn't straighten her out. I looked down and chuckled; then, I let her walk away, sad after pleading with me for an embarrassing minute.

As I watched her lose herself in the crowd, a thought occurred to me. Since I get that much respect when I do security, maybe I should really stick it to the man. I could get a gun, steal the money from the promoter, take the gate myself, and just hijack the entire concert. It was an old scam, but a classic one. I imagined myself talking to Wershe up in Detroit telepathically. He could give me some tips. But, the thought left me, almost as quickly as it came. The trouble was, I didn't really have the chops to do it. And I didn't understand the criminal mind well enough to get away with that kind of shit anyway. I let the fantasy that I was the heir to Meyer Lansky's haunts in Newport, Kentucky slip back where it came from. Besides, I didn't need that kind of negative reputation. Still, I was Steven Lansky, and Meyer's legacy followed me

around like the stink on a low bottom skunk whether I liked it or not. I was even wearing black leather.

While all this was simmering in the back of my mind, all I really wanted was a chance to boff Shoogie without pissing on Leon. I mean, if her dad liked me, then maybe I could ride out of town with them on the big silver bus. On the other hand, maybe I was just like all the rest of his fans, hoping for the impossible. Then, I started to fantasize again. I imagined a moment when I was in the stairwell to the ballroom surrounded by its dark green walls, the steps covered with beer-soaked, black rubber treads. I stood watching the tight skirts flash in and out of the ladies powder room. Then, I saw this guy with a patch over one eye, both eyebrows arching all the same. He was dressed in black leather pants, and a worn jacket that matched the patch and the trousers. He stopped and pulled a pack of bootleg Marlboro Reds out of his rubber heeled cowboy boots. I was wearing Royal Imperial brown brogans, so he couldn't touch me. He didn't know that my Smith and Wesson seven-shooters were imaginary, but I knew we were the only two who would be able see them if the time came that I needed them. He didn't have a clue that I had meditation, time, medication, art, and magic all running his number. It was like I didn't know either, but I had an inkling, and that inkling was enough to fold into a two-dollar bill tucked in my sterling silver money clip. I was the rich motherfucker who held the whole little scene together. In this scenario, I was actually more famous than Leon this night, because I brought him here with the whole wattage from the cottage. And Shoogie liked me for a long minute, looking deep into my soul. She told me in her own way that music can change the world with her daddy's miracle fingers, clammy and syncopated playing that piano, while his throaty singing pulled me up by my fucking bootstraps. I never could have survived this Newport and Cincinnati fall without the sin of lust—even if it was only in the mind.

As the show wrapped up, Leon leapt into an energetic encore. *Kansas City* came through with his gruff voice hollering. I realized that I was the only person in the audience who knew it was the last song. "*I'm goin' to Kansas City and I'm gonna get me some.*" I headed for the rear exit, past the corner of the stage and the steps to the balcony. In the alley, I thought about how Shoogie had been on stage all that time and I wondered why? My best guess was that Leon wanted his daughter where he could see her. I couldn't blame him for wanting to keep an eye on her, but still. I found the Toyota in the dark alley, backed it, the four-cylinder mill whining, to the opening door and heard the applause. Leon came out with a handful of fans trailing behind. He moved steadily with the cane, a blazing silhouette as he crossed in front of the beaming headlights. He sat in front next to me, and Shoogie and her brother piled in back. I drove them over to the bus in silence. When we got there, a couple was waiting to take pictures. Leon was patient with the fans. I stayed in the car, opened the windows and the moon roof, and heard him talking with the other members of the band. Just before he climbed into the tour bus, he said, "On stage, it was audio anarchy tonight." And I thought that would be a great name for a radio show.

In the end, I felt used. Both the drunken girl and the promoter just wanted me for my body, although for different reasons. Being separated from my wife, what was abundantly clear to me was that *she* didn't want my body anymore. This was a sad time for me, too. The intelligent spark in my eye had been dimmed because I was doing work that let my intellect atrophy. I was left with too much time for criminal thoughts. Still, meeting Leon Russell, and having Shoogie and her brother grace my backseat was a little bright spot that gave me an honest buzz as I drove over the bridge

back from Newport that full moon night. I had had the opportunity to feel something that I think many women, but only a few men (who aren't rock stars) get to experience. You know what I mean, and what I mean is—you've got to want all of me, if you want to love me right.